

Russian President Vladimir Putin  
on nationally televised question-  
and-answer session

# Russia

## and the Return of Geopolitics

AP/Wide World Photo (Michael Metzler)

By MILAN N. VEGO

*Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.* —Winston Churchill

**R**ussia is again the subject of serious concern in the West. After a steady decline in its fortunes in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Russia is aggressively flexing its economic and political muscles. Its economy is on the upswing, largely due to the steadily rising prices of oil and natural gas. Russia's military is still a shadow of its Soviet predecessor; however, the current military weaknesses will not last forever. Sooner, rather than later, Russia will restore its military might. Moscow is already trying to restore its power and influence in much of Eurasia. It has moved ever closer to China and to some major European powers to counter what it sees as the "hegemony" of the United States. Resurgent Russia will probably be neither the friend nor the enemy of the West, but a largely independent and highly unpredictable factor in international politics.

### Putin's Regime

For many Russians, the collapse of the Soviet Union was nothing short of a catastrophe: the country fragmented and lost its world

power status. The Russian economy collapsed, and free-market excesses, rampant inflation, and loss of both jobs and the social security net ensued. The era of the first democratically elected Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, left a bitter taste in many Russian mouths.

In 1999, Vladimir Putin, an obscure former KGB agent and chief of that organization's successor, the Federal Security Service (FSB), was appointed as prime minister and a year later replaced Yeltsin as Russia's president. Since then, Putin has been highly successful in concentrating all power in himself and his office. He has achieved Soviet-style stability through essentially eliminating or neutralizing all alternative centers of power and has sidelined any potential challengers. Putin also broke the influence of the Russian oligarchs who dominated the economy under Yeltsin in the 1990s. Despite his clear authoritarian bent and increasingly undemocratic actions, Putin is highly popular in Russia. His approval rating is about 70 percent, and some 40 percent of Russians think that Putin is the

most successful leader since 1917—more successful, in fact, than Stalin or Brezhnev.<sup>1</sup>

Under Putin, Russian state institutions have been reduced to a series of parallel transmission belts. The parliament (Duma) is without much power or authority. Its upper house consists of a collection of nobodies who blindly follow the Kremlin's instructions. Putin's party, Unified Russia, has a two-thirds majority in the Duma's lower house. This ensures that any law proposed by Putin's government is passed without much debate. The opposition in the Duma is essentially deprived of active participation in the legislative process.

In December 2004, Putin's government passed a law that abolished direct elections for all 89 regional governors, and the Kremlin is now considering doing the same for city mayors.<sup>2</sup> All governors and members of the Duma's upper house are now appointed rather than elected. The governors have to submit their mandates to the Federation Council. Although appointed by Putin, their power is limited because their work is monitored by nonconstitutional representatives.

Since 2004, Putin's government has gradually tightened election rules, practically eliminating the concept of free elections. No new political parties exist or can be started unless approved by the Kremlin. It is also no longer possible for independent candidates to be elected to the Duma.<sup>3</sup> The new election bill envisages a ban on creating a "negative image" of a political opponent. This, in fact, means that one cannot criticize incumbents without the risk of violating the law. Another provision of the bill eliminates the minimum percentage turnout requirements for an election to be valid.<sup>4</sup>

Russia today is ruled by active or former members of the secret service and military. In essence, the secret service finally took power in a "silent" coup d'état. After Putin took office, FSB influence and power steadily increased and expanded into many areas. Putin's government used the events of September 11 in the United States as a pretext to justify many of the unconstitutional measures conducted by the FSB. In 2003, Putin directed the secret service to take control of the border guard troops. The service also assumed some of the powers of the former Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information, which was responsible for electronic

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eavesdropping. The FSB is involved not only in intelligence and counterintelligence but also in counterterrorism, economic crime, electronic espionage, border control, social monitoring, and, probably, the country's computerized election system. It determines the fitness of minority investors in strategic sectors of the economy.<sup>5</sup> In short, the FSB is far more powerful than the KGB ever was. It is also trying to extend security zones in Russia's border areas, a move reminiscent of Soviet times.<sup>6</sup>

In the first 2 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some 300,000 KGB agents were laid off.<sup>7</sup> Afterward, many of them went into politics, private businesses and banks, media, cultural institutions, and private security agencies. Not surprisingly, they continued to maintain ties with their former colleagues in the FSB. Many former secret agents were employed by the newly rich oligarchs. Some were even hired by Russian mafia groups as contract killers.

Besides Putin, the current minister of defense, Sergey Ivanov, worked in the KGB and its successor. Ivanov is considered the second most powerful official in Putin's government and most likely Putin's successor. About 150 officials with secret service backgrounds were in key positions in politics and the economy in 2006. About 44 percent of the people in Putin's circle are former secret agents or military. Some 77 percent of the new state elite were members of the

former Soviet *nomenklatura*. The percentage of former secret agents and military in top decisionmaking positions in the government grew from 4.8 percent in 1988 to more than 58 percent in 2002.<sup>8</sup>

Russians can watch foreign stations such as CNN, BBC, and the German *Deutsche Welle*.

Only about 10 percent of the electronic media formally belong to the state.<sup>9</sup> However, some 90 percent of the news is essentially controlled by the government.<sup>10</sup> Formally, censorship of the press does not exist, yet the government uses far subtler and much more effective methods of controlling the press than the Soviet censors ever did. According to Reporters Without Borders, in terms of freedom of the press, Russia today

occupies 138<sup>th</sup> place, just ahead of Belarus, Saudi Arabia, and Cuba.<sup>11</sup>

The state-controlled oil company, Gazprom, bought some of the country's largest newspapers, such as *Izvestiya* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.<sup>12</sup> It is also the majority stockholder of the two most important television stations and a former culture radio station. Smaller papers are routinely harassed by the tax police and intimidated by false charges of fire protection violations or poor working conditions.<sup>13</sup> Journalist unions are controlled by the state and Putin himself. In today's Russia, it is hard to find a paper that is truly independent. Russian journal-

ists who have tried to report on the Russian army's actions in Chechnya or who attempt to investigate corruption among state officials or organized crime are subject to great physical danger. Since 1991, about 260 Russian journalists have been murdered. Only in 21 cases have the perpetrators been identified.<sup>14</sup>

Russia is more open to the outside world than the Soviet Union was. However, the old Soviet-style fears are returning. People who question the Kremlin's policies are increasingly targeted for retaliation on a list circulated on Web sites of shadow ultranationalist groups. In 2006, the Duma passed a law against "political extremism" that is essentially directed against human rights activists who criticize Putin's government.

Freedom of religion is formally guaranteed in Russia. Yet the government has adopted regulations that require religious organizations to give local departments of justice annual confirmation of their ongoing activities. The Russian Orthodox Church is apparently favored by Putin's government; Putin has made several symbolic appearances with the head of the Orthodox Church and some other religious leaders. At the same time, conditions have deteriorated for minority religions at the regional and local level in some areas, and the restrictive law on freedom of conscience and religion continues to disadvantage many minority religious groups considered "nontraditional."

After taking office in 1999, Putin announced a so-called dictatorship of the law. The common sentiment in the West is that Putin may have cracked down on freedoms

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Pro-Communist Russians in Red Square marking 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vladimir Lenin's death

AP/Wide World Photos (Misha Japaridze)

the Kremlin, but at least he has ensured order and stability. But the truth is that there is far less law and order in Putin's Russia than existed in Yeltsin's "chaotic" and corrupt regime.

The culture of illegality prevails in Russia. The mafia controls a sizable chunk of the national economy. There are an estimated 100,000 *mafiosi*, divided into 8,000 groups, organized into about 50 "brigades," rooted in Russian territory.<sup>15</sup> The mafia is either controlled, infiltrated, or in secret alliance with former or active members of the secret police. Violent crime is especially high. For example, from January to October 2006, there were 3,655 murders and attempted murders. Some 500 to 800 contract murders are committed each year in Russia.<sup>16</sup> Many of the victims have been critics of Putin, as was the journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was brutally gunned down in broad daylight in October 2006. Most murder cases are never solved; reasons for this include the widespread and deep corruption of the Russian authorities and the poor salaries and inadequate technical equipment of the police.

### Soviet Nostalgia

The majority of Russians seem to have a deep nostalgia for the Soviet era. Reportedly, about two-thirds of Russians are sorry that the Soviet Union collapsed.<sup>17</sup> In April 2005, Putin said that the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the greatest geopolitical catastrophes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Putin's regime uses a strange mix of tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet symbols. Soldiers dressed in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century uniforms carry the national flag and presidential standard. Putin brought back many imperial Russian symbols. He also restored the Soviet-era national anthem, statues and memorials dedicated to Soviet heroes, the Soviet red flag (banned by Yeltsin), and traditional military medals. The myth of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) is back. Stalin is honored as the "great wartime leader." Volgograd is planning to erect a statue of Stalin alongside those of



President Bush and President Putin addressing press in Slovenia

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. There are also efforts to change Volgograd's name to Stalingrad. Both Stalin and Brezhnev are heroes on Russian television. The disastrous Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is now considered a "struggle against terrorism." The Russian state media are full of propaganda that runs along the same lines as that of the Soviet Union.

Indeed, Putin's government never came to terms with atrocities of the Soviet era. A textbook on Stalin's purges and his role in the war was banned from Russian schools. Gradually, all references to the tragic events during the Soviet era have been removed from high school textbooks.

### Economic Turnaround

One of the great success stories of today's Russia is steady economic growth. In general, the Russian economy is in good shape: The country is considered a good financial risk, and there is little chance of a financial crisis in the near future.<sup>18</sup> During Putin's era, economic growth has averaged 6 percent annually, and the average salary has increased 10 percent each year. For 2005, Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) was estimated at \$766 billion.<sup>19</sup> In August 2006, Russia paid all its Soviet-era debts early to Western countries—some \$22 billion.<sup>20</sup>

The gas and oil sectors combined account for 25 percent of Russia's GDP.<sup>21</sup> Russia is the world's biggest producer of natural gas (40 percent of the world's reserves<sup>22</sup>) and ranks in the top three or four in terms of oil deposits (estimated at 100 billion barrels).<sup>23</sup> The 92 percent rise in petroleum prices in the last 3 years has helped the Kremlin expand its hard currency reserves by more than 65 percent, to about \$280 billion in 2006, or more than the reserves of the entire Euro zone.<sup>24</sup> However, the Russian energy infrastructure is becoming increasingly obsolete. For example, half the Russian pipelines are more than 25 years old, and about

80 percent of the equipment used by the oil industry is outdated. Some 75 percent of the country's proven reserves of oil and natural gas are already in production. Moreover, the country's oil reserves are expected to run dry in 25 years.<sup>25</sup>

Putin's government embarked on the process of obtaining control of the main sectors of the Russian economy. It gave a virtual monopoly to the two largest state companies in the oil sector, Gazprom and Rosneft.<sup>26</sup> The state's share of total oil production has increased from 16 percent in 2000 to almost 40 percent today. In late November 2006, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development criticized the Russian government for its expansion into key economic sectors and raised concern about the seemingly insatiable appetite of Gazprom. Also, despite agreements already signed, the Kremlin has selectively applied environmental laws to ease out Western companies from participating in the development of new and potentially profitable oil fields on the island of Sakhalin.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, Putin's government has imposed significant limits to foreign investment in Russia by declaring certain sectors of the economy, such as energy, aviation, finances, and media, to be "strategic entities." The list has been expanded from 17 to 39 branches of the economy.<sup>28</sup> A foreign company, for instance, cannot own more than 50 percent of a Russian company. To obtain a larger share it must have special approval from the Kremlin.<sup>29</sup>

### State of the Military

In the 1990s, the extremely poor economic situation in the country led to a drastic downsizing of the Russian armed forces. The situation began its turn for the better only in the last few years, due to the steady boost in Russia's economic prospects. In 2004 and 2005, official defense expenditures were 418 billion rubles (US\$14.93 billion) and 531.06 billion rubles (US\$18.96 billion), respectively.<sup>30</sup> In 2006, Russia's nominal military expenditures were estimated at about 2.5 percent of the country's GDP. However, if military-related spending in parts of the federal budget other than military expenditures were included, the spending on defense amounted to about 4 percent of GDP.<sup>31</sup> In 2001, approximately 70 percent of the military

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budget was assigned to maintenance of the armed forces and only 30 percent to weapons procurement. Currently, 43 percent of the budget is spent on weapons procurement. The plan is to redress that imbalance in order to achieve a 50:50 ratio by 2011.<sup>32</sup> The Russian defense ministry announced that some 237 billion rubles would be spent for developing and producing military equipment in 2006. There will be a 30 percent increase for these purposes in 2007.<sup>33</sup> About 5 trillion rubles will be spent on weapons between 2007 and 2015. The priority in spending will be on strategic nuclear forces.

In 1991, the Soviet armed forces totaled some 3.4 million men, compared to the current force of 1.1 million. The plan is to reduce the armed forces to 1 million.<sup>34</sup> By then, professional sergeants would exceed 50 percent, or 40 percent of the total strength of the armed forces.<sup>35</sup> Currently, only 9 percent of Russia's youth are drafted into service. The entire army cannot be turned into a professional army because it would cost 4 or 5 percent of GDP. In 2003, available manpower for the armed forces was 36 million. In 2005, about 330,000 young men were brought into the army for 2 years via conscription. The conscription service will be gradually reduced, from the current 2 years to 1 year as of January 1, 2008. This, in turn, will demand more eligible young men out of a population that is rapidly decreasing.

Defense spending is focused on strategic nuclear forces as the prime deterrent against a major power. In 2004, the strategic nuclear forces consisted of about 630 missiles with 18,000 nuclear warheads.<sup>36</sup> This included about 7,800 operational nuclear warheads (4,400 strategic warheads and 3,400 nonstrategic warheads).<sup>37</sup> Currently, there are about 130 SS-19s in service. The Russians announced plans in 2003 to deploy tens of additional SS-19 missiles with hundreds of warheads starting in 2010. The SS-18s will be retained for the next 10 to 15 years. The plan is to keep in service 15 rail-based SS-24s. The force of SS-25s was reduced to 312 in 2004. Modest production of the SS-27 Topol continues.<sup>38</sup> Despite the reduced number of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), the Russians possess a credible nuclear deterrent. Their Topol-M ICBMs can reportedly penetrate any missile defense. The plan is to reduce by about 60 percent the number of ICBM warheads by withdrawing from service the number of

SS-18s/SS-19s from 2,000 to about 760 in the next 4 years.<sup>39</sup>

The sea-based nuclear deterrent force consists of 14 submarines: 2 Typhoons, 6 Delta-IVs, and 6 Delta-IIIs. These fleet ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) are deployed with the Northern and Pacific Fleets. In contrast, the Soviets had 62 operational SSBNs in 1990.<sup>40</sup> Three advanced *Borey*-class SSBNs are under construction. The first of these SSBNs will be delivered in 2008. The third SSBN is scheduled for completion in 2012. Each *Borey*-class SSBN is armed with 12 SS-N-27 Bulava submarine-launched ballistic missiles with a range of more than 8,000 kilometers. The Russian SSBNs conducted three deterrent patrols in 2005; two in 2004 and 2003 each; and none in 2002. In contrast, they conducted 61 patrols in 1990.

Russian strategic aviation has in service 94 nuclear-armed bombers (14 Tu-160 Blackjacks, 32 Tu-95 MS6 Bear-H6, 32 Tu-95 MS, and 16 Bear H16). These bombers carry 872 cruise missiles (AS-15a/b LKh-55 air-launched cruise missiles and AS-16 short-range air-to-surface attack missiles) and/or nuclear bombs. Smaller scale production of the Blackjacks resumed in 2004.

The antiballistic missile system around Moscow consists mostly of 100 underground interceptors designed to carry 1 nuclear warhead each. The system known as A-135 consists of 2 layers of interceptors: an outer ring of 4 launchers armed with 32 Gorgon interceptors, each carrying a 1-megaton warhead; and an inner ring of 4 launch complexes with 68 Gazelle interceptors, each carrying one 10-kiloton warhead. In addition, a considerable number of SA-10 Grumble surface-to-air missiles may also have nuclear capability against some ballistic missiles.

Ground forces currently comprise some 321,000 men (including 190,000 conscripts) or about 30 percent of total forces.<sup>41</sup> They are organized into 19 infantry divisions, 10 motor-rifle brigades, 5 tank divisions, 4 airborne divisions, 3 airborne brigades, 3 artillery divisions, and 11 artillery brigades, plus 9 special forces brigades.<sup>42</sup> The army's greatest problem is a shortage of draftees because of the country's steadily reduced birth rate over the past 20 years. Another problem is the poor health and lack of education of many

draftees. The plan is to replace 50 percent of the current conscript force with professional soldiers by 2008.<sup>43</sup>

The Russian air force was greatly reduced in numbers in the 1990s.<sup>44</sup> The air forces and air defense troops were merged into a single service in 1998. In 2003, the major part of the Russian army's aviation—mostly helicopters—was transferred to the air force. The 180,000-man air force operates long-range aviation (63 Tu-95, 15 Tu-160 nuclear-capable bombers, and 117 Tu-22M bombers, plus some tankers and training aircraft), 6 combined frontal aviation armies (370 Su-24 tactical bombers and 255 Su-25 ground attack aircraft) and air defense armies (5 MiG-25, 255 MiG-29, 390 Su-27, and 255 MiG-31 fighter/interceptor aircraft), and transport aviation.<sup>45</sup> The service still suffers from a lack of funds, both for procurement and modernization and for pilot training.

The number of flight training hours is far below standard levels: it ranges from 20 to 25 hours annually for fighter aviation to 60 hours annually for transport aviation.<sup>46</sup>

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many naval vessels were scrapped or laid up because of the shortage of funds. Since 1991, the overall strength of the Russian navy has declined from 450,000 to 155,000 (including 11,000 strategic nuclear forces, 35,000 naval aviation, and 9,500 naval infantry).<sup>47</sup> The number of aircraft fell from 1,666 to 556;

submarines from 317 to 61; and surface ships from 967 to 186. Naval bases outside of Russia were evacuated except for Sevastopol, Crimea. Only 66 percent of 170 factories supporting naval shipbuilding remained in the Russian Federation. The supply of spare parts was also disrupted. The lost bases and training facilities are difficult or impossible to replace. The ship construction program was essentially stopped.

The situation began to change for the better in 2000 when new ships were built for the Russian navy. However, the ships are still not built in series, as they were in the past. The Russian navy started to build frigates, corvettes, and small ships for the Caspian Flotilla. There are currently no plans to build destroyers and cruisers. In 2005, however, plans were announced to build a class of four new aircraft carriers in 2013–2014, with initial service to begin in 2017.<sup>48</sup>

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Currently, the Russian navy is organized into four fleets: the Baltic Fleet with headquarters in Baltiysk; the Pacific Fleet in Vladivostok; the Northern Fleet in Severomorsk; and the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol. In addition, the Kaliningrad special region is subordinate to the Baltic Fleet. It consists of ground and coastal forces, with one motor-rifle division and motor-rifle brigade and a fighter aviation regiment.<sup>49</sup> The Caspian Flotilla is based in Astrakhan and Makhachkala. In 2006, the navy's inventories included—besides SSBNs—22 nuclear-powered submarines (6 nuclear-powered cruise missile attack submarines and 16 nuclear attack submarines), 22 submarines, 1 aircraft carrier, 2 battle cruisers, 5 cruisers, 14 destroyers, 10 frigates, 8 light frigates, and 23 missile corvettes.<sup>50</sup>

Rapid economic growth since 2000 has given Russia a unique opportunity to pursue military reforms. Russia's military experts believe that the country needs mobile forces that are appropriately sized, trained, and equipped without burdening the national economy and increasing reliance on contract military personnel. The prerequisites for military reform are not only rapid and stable economic growth but also accelerated growth in high technology and science-intensive industries. However, the improvements in the Russian economy have not been sufficient to meet that objective. The top political leadership apparently cannot decide whether to move toward smaller, conventional, professional, high-tech expeditionary forces or continue with large but conventional forces combined with modernized nuclear strategic forces.

Despite the drastic reduction in their size since 1991, the Russian armed forces have old weapons and equipment. According to some reports, only about 10 to 20 percent of all weapons in the inventories are modern. Funds for upgrading existing and producing new weapons and equipment are in short supply. For example, between 2000 and 2004, the Russian army added only 15 new tanks to its inventory of about 23,000.<sup>51</sup> Production of artillery shells lags considerably. There is an acute shortage of modern munitions in conventional warheads. The Russian air force lacks adequate

supplies of various types of aircraft munitions.<sup>52</sup> The absence of practice munitions in the ground forces greatly complicates personnel combat training.<sup>53</sup>

The social status of the Russian military is low. The reduced defense spending in the 1990s caused reductions in salaries and severe shortages of housing and other amenities. Qualified junior officers are in short supply.<sup>54</sup> The morale and motivation of the rank and file are rather low. Some 40 percent of the contract soldiers are reportedly dismissed after only 4 to 5 months of service. In the first half of 2004, 7,300 servicemen, including 800 officers, were convicted of various crimes.<sup>55</sup> There is widespread draft avoidance. Currently, there are an estimated 17,000 draft dodgers.<sup>56</sup> Army efforts to stop abuse and hazing have largely failed, due at least in part to the apathy of poorly paid and housed junior and senior officers. Hazing is also a major cause of draft dodging and the significant increase in suicide rates among draftees.<sup>57</sup> There is a lack of sufficient training, resulting in low combat readiness.<sup>58</sup>

### Influence of Geopolitics

Geopolitics came back with a vengeance after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike the Soviets, the Russians today do not consider geopolitics a pseudoscience. The enduring and paramount importance of geopolitics in the thinking and policies of the Russian elite cannot be understood without a geographical, demographic, and historical context.

The Russian Federation encompasses a territory of about 6.5 million square miles. It stretches over 10 time zones. Russia's borders are 43,500 miles long, while the coastline stretches for about 23,620 miles. According to the last census (in 2002), ethnic Russians comprised 145 million (81.5 percent) of the population of the Russian Federation. There are also 100 different ethnic groups.<sup>59</sup>

*the Baltic and Europe's northern seas are becoming a zone of serious strategic Russian interest*

However, the population trend is highly unfavorable for the future of Russia. Due to the combined effects of alcohol abuse, poor health services, and a decreasing fertility rate, the number of ethnic Russians has been reduced by about 900,000 (some sources say 700,000) per year since 1999. In 2004, the average life expectancy in Russia was 64.9 years (58.9 years for males and 72.3 for females) compared to 70.1 years in the Soviet era (in 1987).<sup>60</sup> The national fertility

rate is currently estimated at 1.28 children per woman, far below that necessary to maintain the current population of about 143 million.<sup>61</sup> Alcohol abuse is the cause of one in three deaths in Russia. If the current trends continue, Russia will lose 50 million inhabitants in the next 50 years.<sup>62</sup>

Traditionally, Russians prefer strategic depth for their security. That has been one of the reasons for the continuous expansion of the Russian Empire since Peter the Great. Today's Russia is the smallest in size since before the reign of Catherine the Great. Ukraine, which had been the heartland of the Russian Empire since the 9<sup>th</sup> century, is, at least for the time being, lost. After the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Russia lost the buffer zone between its westernmost border and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in central Europe. One of the most painful consequences of the Soviet collapse has been Russia's much less favorable access to the Baltic. Russia also lost control over Belarus and Moldova, northern Caucasus, and vast stretches of Central Asia. The attempted secessions of Chechnya, and continuing uncertainties over the Russian control in Dagestan and Tatarstan, indicate that the process of fragmentation may not yet be complete.<sup>63</sup>

Geopolitically, the areas of the greatest importance for Russia are the western Arctic, the Baltic, Ukraine, the Black Sea–Caucasus–Caspian area, Central Asia, and Siberia. The western Arctic region is perhaps one of the most stable geopolitical spaces from Russia's perspective. Murmansk will become the gateway for crude oil from the Timan-Pechora basins and western Siberia. Siberian hydrocarbon and offshore drilling are increasingly important and valuable.

The Baltic is one of the most critical geopolitical regions for Moscow. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's access to the Baltic was reduced to only the Bay of Kronstadt and Kaliningrad's enclave. Access to the Baltic is barred by the string of essentially unfriendly (for good reason) Baltic states and Poland. Sweden is politically neutral but geostrategically anti-Russian. The Baltic and Europe's northern seas are becoming a zone of serious strategic Russian interest.

Moscow's policy toward the Baltic states is essentially to delegitimize their right to be independent. On numerous occasions—despite the historical facts—Russian officials, including Putin, have disputed that the Baltic

**Russian Tor-M1 missile launcher vehicle participating in training exercise in Russia**

states were occupied by Soviet forces in 1940. In Moscow's view, the Baltic states were annexed but not "occupied"; the annexation of these three independent states was legal because it was carried out in accordance with the formalities of international law that were in effect during World War II. Also, Moscow constantly threatens the Baltic states for real or imaginary repression of Russian minorities there.<sup>64</sup> In the absence of a strong NATO and firm U.S. leadership, the fate of all three Baltic states will be uncertain.

For both Moscow and the West, a major problem is the future of Ukraine as an independent and fully sovereign state. If Russia obtains political control of Ukraine, it would cease to exist as a traditional nation-state but would become part of an empire. The major adverse factor for the future of an independent Ukraine is the rather large Russophile sentiment in the southeastern part of the country.<sup>65</sup>

A major source of friction between Russia and Ukraine is the presence of Russian forces at the naval base in Sevastopol. The agreement to lease the base for the Russian navy was signed in 1997 after a long political and diplomatic dispute between Moscow and Kyiv. The Russian and new Ukrainian navy share facilities at Sevastopol, including headquarters of both the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the Ukrainian navy. The future of the Russian naval presence in Crimea after 2017 is currently uncertain. Putin proposed in October 2006 that Russia should decide alone whether it is more advantageous to build a new naval base on its territory in the area of Novorossiysk or to continue leasing facilities in Sevastopol. However, Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko recently ruled out any extension of the lease of naval base Sevastopol.<sup>66</sup> Moscow and most Russians are convinced that Crimea will be returned to their control one day.

Russia's policy toward Moldova is aimed toward exerting continuous leverage by keeping it permanently divided and subject at all times to the threat of the secession of Transnistria (a narrow strip of Moldova's territory east of the Dniester River) backed by Russian arms.<sup>67</sup> Transnistria declared its independence from Moldova in 1991. Its population of about 550,000 is about 60 percent Slavic, while Moldovans are ethnic Romanians. Transnistria does not have a direct land link with Russia. Russia maintains a small contingent of troops there, the so-called 14<sup>th</sup> Army, with a 1,000-man

motor-rifle brigade, plus more than 100 tanks, 215 armored vehicles, and 7 combat helicopters.<sup>68</sup> Moscow also has issued passports to any citizens of Transnistria who asked for them.<sup>69</sup> The Kremlin has indicated on many occasions that it has no intention of withdrawing its forces from Transnistria, despite the commitment Russia gave at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) meeting in Istanbul in 1999 to do so unconditionally. Moscow portrays the Russian military presence in Transnistria as peace-keeping.<sup>70</sup> Its policy toward Moldova is a clear example of the abiding continuities of Russia's imperial policy.

In the Black Sea region, geostrategic and energy aims are intertwined. Russia controls only part of the Black Sea's southeastern coastline, but most of the energy transportation and distribution network. The Caucasus is an interface between Europe and Asia where several major powers' zones of interest overlap. The Transcaucasus is also a transport corridor for energy.<sup>71</sup> Moscow's meddling and threats are the principal reasons for the almost continuous turmoil and crisis in the Caucasus. Its ultimate aim is to restore its power and influence in the area or at least to cause political and economic difficulties for Western-leaning countries.

Moscow has the most serious problems in its relations with Georgia because of its support for the secessionist movement in Abkhazia and southern Ossetia. Russia also sided with Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan over the Berg-Karabech enclave (13.6 percent of Armenia's territory). After several years of delaying its commitment to withdraw its troops from Georgia, Moscow finally signed an agreement with Tbilisi in March 2006 to withdraw some 3,000 Russian troops from Batumi and Akhalkalaki bases and other installations in Georgia. The Russian forces already vacated the base at Akhalkalaki, and the Batumi base is scheduled for closure before the end of 2008. Russia was also obliged under the terms of the OSCE agreement in 1999 to leave the Gudauta base near Tbilisi; however, in the end, the Russians refused to leave.

Moscow's prospects for restoring its power and influence are the most promising in Central Asia. This is due to the geostrategic isolation of the area, political backwardness of the newly independent states, and their almost complete dependence on Russia for

technical help in extracting their large energy resources and exporting these resources to Europe and other markets.

Kazakhstan is Russia's most important strategic partner. Numerous security agreements were signed between Russia and Kazakhstan, and the Russians maintain a small contingent of military specialists there. In Kyrgyzstan, Russian troops are stationed (since October 2003) at Kant, a former Soviet base near Bishkek. Their official mission is to struggle against terrorism. Some 50 Russian ground attack aircraft (probably Sukhoi Su-25s) are to be based there.<sup>72</sup> Reportedly, there are plans to create a 10,000-man joint force in Central Asia with headquarters most likely at Kant.<sup>73</sup>

Tajikistan has a long tradition of military cooperation with Russia. After the country's independence, the 201<sup>st</sup> Division and about 12,000 Russian troops remained in Tajikistan. Currently, about 7,000 troops of the 201<sup>st</sup> (including about 130 tanks, 315 armored vehicles, 180 pieces of artillery, and several combat aircraft) plus 2,000 Russian advisors are supervising some 13,000 Tajik border troops along the Afghan border. The division was recently transformed into a permanent force subordinate to the Volga-Ural military district in Yekaterinburg.<sup>74</sup> The Russians also operate an air surveillance center at Nurek base. Tajikistan signed an agreement with Russia in October 2004, which should lead to closer economic and security cooperation between the two countries.

Turkmenistan is the least politically connected with Russia of all Central Asian states. Its relations with Russia were cool and occasionally tense in the 1990s. The relations started to improve only after April 2003 when both countries signed an agreement on security and economic cooperation. Turkmen leadership seems to be determined to pursue its current policy of "eternal neutrality," which seems not to bother the Kremlin.

Prior to 1991, most Soviet nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons were produced in Uzbekistan. Afterward, Uzbekistan's relations with Russia were often tense because of its desire to steer toward a more autonomous policy on security issues. This, in turn, greatly angered Moscow. In 1999, Uzbekistan joined a group of Western-oriented countries dubbed GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), only to leave that organization in 2005. Uzbekistan made a drastic change of policy toward Russia in 2001

when it joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is dominated by Russia and China. Since spring 2005, Uzbekistan has apparently turned toward building an even closer relationship with Moscow.

Russia's control of Siberia, a huge and resource-rich territory, is potentially tenuous because of the combination of vast distances and a small population. The distance from Moscow to the easternmost part of Siberia is about 5,600 miles, roughly the same as the distance to Sydney, Australia. Russia shares a 2,670-mile border with an increasingly powerful and affluent China. One day China might well claim the territories on the Amur River that Russia annexed between 1858 and 1860; these territories are equal in size to Germany and France combined. The population of Siberia has been steadily declining, from 8 million in 1991 to 6.5 million today. In the 2002 census, out of 155,000 villages in Siberia, about 13,000 were simply abandoned and 35,000 housed less than 10 inhabitants.<sup>75</sup> In contrast, the total population in 3 adjoining Chinese provinces is 107 million. Chinese traders and laborers are more visible in the Russian cities, and the Siberian population buys cheap Chinese apparel. Russian business craves cheap Chinese laborers.

### Commonwealth of Independent States

Moscow created the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) at Almaty, Kazakhstan, in late December 1991. All former Soviet republics, with the exception of the Baltic states, became members of the commonwealth. This organization was established primarily to find a bloodless way of breaking up the Soviet Union. An October 2006 summit of CIS leaders wanted to limit the commonwealth to matters of transport, migration policy, cross-border criminality, and education and culture. Russia and Belarus opposed these limits because it would lead to the breakup of the commonwealth and benefit its enemies. Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine want to overcome Russia's foot-dragging regarding border demarcation, most conspicuously with Ukraine. The proposal is that the final borders should be the same as the administrative borders in the pre-1991 Soviet Union.

In essence, Russian high officials do not accept the current boundaries of the Russian Federation. The Russian unilateralist approach is evident in its imperial attitude and ongoing demands for bases throughout

the commonwealth, its obstruction in CIS secessionist conflicts, sudden price increases for oil and natural gas, attempts to obtain controlling share over the energy transportation and distribution system in the "near abroad" states, and politically motivated bans on import of certain goods from these states. Hegemony in the commonwealth is considered by Moscow as essential for restoration of its dominant position in Eurasia regardless of the negative consequences on Russia's relations with Europe and future integration into a European system.

Russians traditionally prefer a strong leader. Putin's administration has achieved some tangible successes both internally and abroad. Due to the steady increase of revenues from oil and natural gas, the average Russian's life is now much better than it was in the 1990s. Also, by centralizing almost all power in his hands, Putin has brought about much-needed stability. In addition, he has restored national pride and made Russia a major power again.

Since Putin took office, a trend has set in toward an increasingly undemocratic and ruthless regime. This should not come as a surprise because the Russian government is essentially in the hands of the former secret agents and military. The presence of too many active and former members of the KGB and its successor, the FSB, is the principal reason for the steady deterioration of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and human rights in Russia. The brutal war in Chechnya is another factor that has led to the worsening of the human rights situation. The old, deep-seated Russian nationalism, hatred of foreigners, and outright racisms are on the rise.

Russia's military still has not recovered from the drastic downsizing of the 1990s. It is also beset by poor states of combat readiness, low motivation, poor discipline, rampant graft and corruption, and shortages of modern weapons and equipment. However, this situation seems to be changing for the better, as more funds are allocated for modernizing and improving the social status of military personnel. Sooner or later, Russia's military power will become another powerful tool in the hands of Moscow in dealing not only with pro-Western and independent states in its backyard but also possibly in relations with Europe.

Putin's policies are clearly aimed toward increasing influence on both the internal and external policies of the former Soviet republics. Moscow is obviously embarked on

a policy to restore control over much of the geopolitical space that Russia lost in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991.

Russia's real concern in opposing NATO expansion to include the former Soviet republics, specifically Ukraine and Georgia, is not the threat of "invasion," but the bringing of democracy and the rule of law into what Moscow sees as its rightful geopolitical space. Russia has good reason for objecting to what it sees as the encroachment of potentially unfriendly states on its doorstep or in its backyard. The West in general should show more sensitivity in its policies toward Russia and the former Soviet republics. The Alliance should reconsider whether Ukraine should be admitted as a new member. Some other security arrangement should be found to ensure continued independence and territorial integrity of that pivotal state. Likewise, Georgia should be offered a special relationship with NATO but not full membership. At the same time, the United States and its allies must make clear to Moscow that it does not have a license to blackmail, pressure, or even extinguish the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine and the new independent states in the Caucasus. Under no circumstances should NATO allow Russia's policy of threats to succeed against the Baltic states.

U.S. and Western high officials should not publicly castigate Moscow for its lack of democratic norms. Such actions are invariably counterproductive for the cause of democracy in Russia. The best way to support Russian democracy is through activities of the elected bodies, such as the U.S. Congress, European parliaments, nongovernmental organizations, private volunteer organizations, and Western media. The United States and its allies should focus on Moscow's foreign policies, and especially its politically motivated manipulation of energy prices and supplies against the small states in Eurasia. Russia will eventually resort to military threats against these states, unless America and Europe make it clear that there will be serious consequences for mutual relations on a host of issues. The firm and principled stand has the best chances of success in countering the Kremlin's neo-imperial policies. Moscow traditionally despises weakness and has repeatedly shown healthy respect for the strength and determination of those who stand up to its aggressive policies.

As for the future, it is likely that there will be serious tension between Russia and the West over myriad issues. The possibility of a

serious conflict should not be excluded.<sup>1</sup> But the situation will not resemble that of the Cold War. Russia will be authoritarian and nationalistic, but it will lack any messianic ideology such as Marxism-Leninism. Hence, it will not represent the global and mortal threat to the West that the Soviet Union did. **JFQ**

## NOTES

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<sup>7</sup> Boris Reitschuster, *Putin Demokratie. Wie der Kreml den Westen das Furchten lehrt*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed. (Berlin: Ullstein, 2006), 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>9</sup> "Die neue, alte Grossmacht," 91.

<sup>10</sup> "Todesurteil aus Moskau," *Der Spiegel*, December 4, 2006, 128.

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<sup>12</sup> "Todesurteil aus Moskau," 128.

<sup>13</sup> "Diktatur des Gesetzes," *Der Spiegel*, October 16, 2006, 139.

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